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TWELVE WOODBLOCK PRINTS

This thesis is an attempt to present a personal statement in a group of woodblock prints executed from an intuitive point of view with human emotions as subject matter.

The thesis is comprised of twelve woodblock prints, that were exhibited in Weatherspoon Gallery, University of North Carolina at Greensboro during the last two weeks of May, 1969, fulfilling the major requirements of the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

Thirty-five MM color slides representative of this work are on file in the University of North Carolina at Greensboro Library.

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Submitted
May 1969

Approved by

Helen Thrush
Miss Helen Thrush

TWELVE WOODBLOCK PRINTS

by

Roland S. Watts

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
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May 1969

Approved by

Helen Thrusdale
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APPROVAL SHEET

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INTRODUCTION

The earliest recorded history of man reveals evidence of his need to communicate ideas and concepts. In order to express himself he used symbol-images, or pictures. All were original works of art, none of which could be reproduced. The audience was therefore limited.

The development of the hand-cut woodblock (the first of the graphic arts) made possible the multi-original. For the first time artists could produce a number of duplicate originals possessing all the special qualities of the single original.

A print is an impression taken from some kind of matrix from which further facsimile impressions can be made. The term "print" had, in the beginning, a purely functional connotation, implying a substitute for a product of fine art. From the sixteenth century onward it became the "fine print", produced by artists for illustration, decoration, or simply as a manifestation of pure aesthetic impulse. It became a "work of art".

It may be somewhat difficult to conceive of prints as being original in the same sense that a drawing is unique. In printmaking this means original in terms of the subject, the design, the technical preparation of the woodblock, and the printing itself, although this latter may be in collaboration with a printer-technician. Each impression in an edition pulled from an original plate is an original print.

The block selected for the wood cut should be of a consistent thickness. It should be soft enough to be cut with reasonable ease by the gouges, yet hard enough so that it will not crumble. The wood that I most commonly use is 3/4 " thick, white pine. This is clear grain, knot free and soft enough for cutting. A wide range of widths is available, and lengths can be cut as desired. Poplar, apple, bass, and cherry can be used, each of which varies in hardness and closeness of grain.

Plywood which comes in a number of different finishes, has become increasingly popular with me and I used it in several prints to obtain certain grain texture effects.

A preliminary sketch should be made. This sketch should be traced onto the woodblock or lightly redrawn with colored chalk. A careful draw-

ing is then made on the block, using a brush and black ink, or a felt-tipped marking pen. A wash or middle-tone brown ink, or water color, is brushed over the whole face of the block. The block is then ready for cutting. The print will result in a mirror reversal of the original drawing. Figures facing left will face right after printing and any text will read backwards. To correct this situation either the drawing is made in reverse and traced face down on the block, or it originates on transparent paper which is glued face to the block and cut through from the back. I have found that there are various ways of transferring the drawing on to the block.

The components of any work of art are line, shape, texture and color. Their proper use must be understood, because a good composition must create a satisfying feeling of balance and movement. When lines and shapes are placed in a definite relation to one another, they will form a harmonious rhythmic arrangement.

The area of wood which is not going to print must be cut away so that it is lower than the printing surface. It is not necessary to gouge out the wood deeply. The knife is generally used to cut an outline around the area which is to print. The knife must cut at an angle, sloping away from the printing area. If the knife is held so that it undercuts the printing surface this surface may crumble or collapse when making prints.

The gouge should be held so that the butt of the handle is snug against the pad of the thumb. The gouge is pushed by the pressure of the pad of the hand, not by the fingers. The fingers are used to aim the gouge and guide its direction. The gouge naturally cuts more easily when following the grain of the wood than when cutting against it. A slight rocking move-

ment of the gouge should be used when going against the grain. After the block is cut, the relief is charged with either a special Japanese brush or a roller. The printing process may take place through pressure applied downward on the paper by stamping or by superimposing the paper on the upturned block and rubbing with the back of a spoon, brayer or similar tool.

Woodblock papers have two important characteristics: softness and absorbancy. While ordinary newsprint will serve for pulling proofs, the final prints are usually made on Japanese rice paper manufactured specifically for woodblock printing. Numerous sizes, weights, and thicknesses are available. My favorite types of paper are Unryu and Toshi. The Unryu is white and the threads are quite visible and when printed upon make a very strong statement. I prefer the Toshi paper because of its thin fine texture and the finish is like satin. Rice paper has a rough and smooth side. These can be distinguished by rubbing the paper between the thumb and forefinger. The smoother side is right for printing.

SUMMARY

This paper is by no means the final one to be written on the art of woodblock printing. No doubt new unpredictable ones will be added by the future students. Still, in a retrospective view of the more than five-hundred year history of the woodcut, certain inherent traits which are characteristic of the medium emerge to underline the intrinsic value of woodblock printing as a visual art. The act of preparing and printing a block imparts special qualities of line, tone, and color which are unlike those of any other medium. The control of these factors, from the very craft roots of block printing requires a specialized skill and a disciplined technique in the handling of tools and processes.

For me, the craft of woodblock printing is invariably a search for an expression of new artistic ideas in a manner ideally suited for an aesthetic and intellectual statement.

In this paper, I have stressed techniques and their genesis not only as mere steps in a strictly technical development, but also as a means of understanding their functions in the service of the artistic temperament.

From this, I may conclude that the art of woodblock printing is no mere by-product of the painter-sculptor, but an art which serves as an agent for expanding the artist's sensibilities and perceptions into new dimensions. It is an art creating its own challenge and engendering its own horizons.

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HOPE
12" X 18"

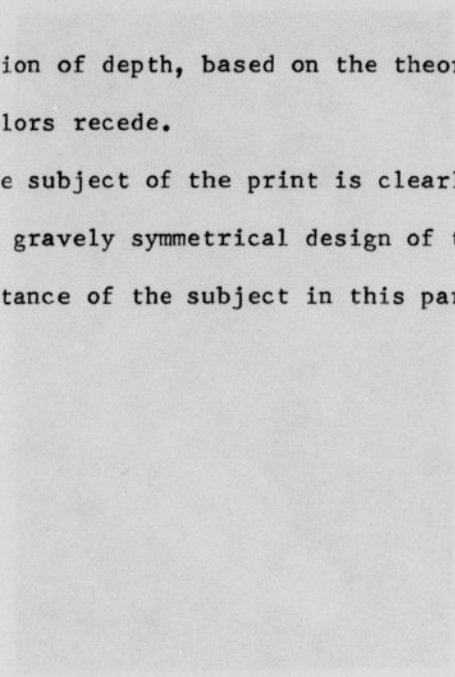
The human state of happiness and despair have always been tempered by a vision of a better life. The figure in this woodblock print inside of a church, in a pew with a Gothic window in the background slightly off center, gives every indication of human conflict.

I have attempted to show abject misery in the figure, but I have also attempted to show the surrender of the figure to powers greater than he is; the figure is nude, because we are naked before the Supreme Being, but the actual surroundings suggest that this miserable creature has found a place where he can find, and experience, "HOPE".

This is a multi-color print, using a warm black for the wall and a cool black for the figure seated in the pew. To achieve this, I mixed one part black with three parts of red oil base ink for the warm and one half blue and one half black oil base ink for the cool. This was done to

produce the illusion of depth, based on the theory that warm colors advance and cool colors recede.

Moreover, the subject of the print is clearly meant to be serious, even solemn. The gravely symmetrical design of the Gothic window conveys the special importance of the subject in this particular setting.





PREMATURE
12" X 18"

One of the emotional traumas in life, is giving birth. Sometimes there are increasing difficulties attached to this physical and emotional strain of bringing life into this world; especially does this become more harrowing when the event comes before it is expected and the necessity for care and nurture become more insistent.

In this print I have attempted to show the anguish of the mother at the moment of her discovery of her infant's death, along with the sorrow and disbelief of this terrible loss. I feel that this representation of the mother and dead child has great emotional appeal.

Realism here has become purely a vehicle of expression: the agonized faces and limbs are of a puppet-like thinness and rigidity. So overwhelming is the sense of mercy and pity that one will identify his own feelings completely with those of the grief-stricken mother.

I wanted this print to remain in darkness, with the feeling that the figures were emerging from this darkness. The size of the baby in comparison with the mother's arm is to focus attention on prematurity. For some life and balance in the print, I wanted good texture in the hair to react with the premature child.



ESCAPE

18" X 24"

Man is eternally involved in situations of one kind or another from which he has a desire to flee. The figure in this woodblock print has realized the futility of trying to escape. He is caught in a trap of life and just before this moment of his death, he realizes his futility of an attempt to get out of an impossible situation.

The facial expression itself is not unprecedented, but coupled with the vehement forward rush, the movement of the entire figure is overpowering.

To create the illusion of depth, I used the overlapping for the barbed wire within the figure, the white and dark areas, and making the arm and hand in the immediate foreground larger. The clenched fist and mouth showing agony lead to a stronger emotional impact.



DEATH AND THE RATTLER
18" X 16"

There has been a traditional fear through the ages of man from reptilian life, and he also has connected reptiles with death. In this print using the grain of the wood to my best advantage, I attempted to show a universal symbol of death, and in the over print I wanted to show the reptile as he has been, not only an object of fear, worship and death, but something of aesthetic value as well.

Superstitions and myths have plagued man all through the centuries, but the indomitable spirit of man increases continually in his great fight against the powers of darkness.

This is a multi-colored print, using a bluish grey for the skull in the background. I used steel-wool on the plywood of the skull because I wanted the woodgrain effect. The skull was cut from the plywood with the use of a jig saw and glued on to another board where registration was set up to fit with the second block, which overlapped.



BONDAGE
12" X 18"

In this woodblock print I have attempted to show a powerful figure in a struggle against the chains that bind him. Since the beginning of time, man has always been held captive in some way, whether mental or physical. This print depicts a physical struggle with no apparent freedom in sight. His nakedness suggests that, he has been stripped of his pride along with all earthly possessions for here we see him against steel in human "BONDAGE".

The print is carved in powerfully rounded forms and filled with a deep concern for the suffering involved. I attempted to make particularly striking, the forward bulge of the heavy body, which makes the physical strain on the arms and shoulders seem almost unbearably real. The face with its angular features, has turned into a mask of agony, from which all hope is lost.

It is precisely controlled dynamics of every contour, both in the main figure and in the background, that unite the varied elements of the composition into a coherent whole.



STAR GAZER
12" X 18"

Man has always looked toward the heavens, at the stars, the sun and the moon, sometimes in fear, anxiety or worship. In this multi-color print, I have attempted to show a man gazing at the stars in search of the answer from the unknown. The star gazer in this print is represented by a powerful figure, yet he is like a grain of sand on a beach when compared with the might and depth of the universe.

The universe is revealed through the use of a warm black for the background with the warmest portion around the head of the figure.



THE END OF A PRAYER
24" X 28"

In this print, I have combined the figure with an architectural background in an attempt to characterize the strength of the priest. While he is obviously within a church I wanted to show his structural strength which far outstrips that of the church itself. His posture and garb have been carved to resemble a stone pillar. Here, I have tried to depict a man whose inner strength surpasses the institution which contains him.

To give the illusion of greater depth, I made this a multi-color print, using a warm black for the interior and a cool black for the actual figure itself.



INMATE
12" X 13"

In this print, I have combined man and architecture once again with a different outcome in mind. Here man is being contained by the bars that surround him. There is a contradiction apparent here when one compares the size of the man and the size of the bars. I have tried to display the defeated and crumbled attitude of this large and powerful being who is held captive by the several vertical elements. While the Priest in the print titled "The End Of Prayer", represents the height to which man can ascend, the Inmate portrays the depth of man's despair.



THE LAST DAY
18" X 24"

This woodblock print depicts an interest in movement, coupled with slender proportions and an emphasis on outline rather than on modeling. What I wanted to do most in this print, was not to use the nude body as an expressive instrument, but to gain the deep sense of tragedy that pervades the scene. The subject in the Last Day is illuminated by the full flare of the flames that await him, his body is attenuated and drained of all weight and muscular power, very much aware that this is his "Last Day".

This is a four block color print, using a graduation of vermilion for the flames, lid, and the pit. I achieved a sharp contrast with the figure, hand and interior by using a cold black. I wanted the hand to produce the illusion of emerging out of the darkness and for this reason, detail of the arm was limited. To add a flicker to the flames,

I put yellow ink on top of each inking which produced accents of yellow and orange with vermilion.



THE MAD MONK
12" X 19"

This print portrays a religious figure who is at the present praying for forgiveness of his own sins. His quiet dignity, with hands clutched in prayer, suggests that he should remind us not so much of sin but perhaps evilness. Actual evil, by contrast, is represented in the small, violent expression, yet this face conveys a vivid sense of character.

In order to achieve a striking contrast between the hands and the rest of the composition, details have been simplified or omitted altogether. In this print I attempted to interpret the Monk's personality by suppressing some traits and emphasizing others. I wanted a strong black to play against the background and bring out what features I have in the face and hands. To accomplish this I used three parts of black block printing ink to one part blue with a small amount of extender.



THE BEGINNING, LIFE & DEATH
18" X 24"

All things must begin, live and die. In this print, I have attempted to show the life span of man, with his beginning starting from an egg, with the arms and hands of life holding this universal symbol of his death.

This is a multi-color print and a new technique that I used for the first time. I wanted the egg and skull to have a woodgrain effect, and to achieve this I used steelwool on plywood which will remove the soft areas, and leave the grain, which is harder, to make the print. I printed the egg and the skull in a mixture of three parts blue, and one black, so that the grain would be lighter than the overlapping print with a mixture of one part blue and three parts black. Yellow paper was placed behind the egg; this illuminated this area, giving the feeling of life, allowing the arms as they emerge from the egg in darkness to the light of life toward

death at the fingertips. This print represents symbolically the whole life span of man.



The artist's intention was to express the human condition as a whole, not just the physical aspect, but the spiritual and emotional. This is why the figure is so central, and the background is so simple. The artist wanted to show that the human figure is the most important part of the world.

In this print, I wanted to create the illusion of a human figure in a very simple way. For this I used the background as a simple shape, and the figure as a simple shape. The figure is the most important part of the world, and the background is the most important part of the world. The figure is the most important part of the world, and the background is the most important part of the world. The figure is the most important part of the world, and the background is the most important part of the world.



88 KEYS
12" X 19"

The powerful figure seated at the piano exemplifies man's desires and love for music. Here, I have depicted a man so involved with the 88 Keys, that one might get the feeling that he has completely isolated himself from the rest of the world.

In this print, I wanted to create the illusion of a man perhaps on a stage or in the center of a concert. For this I let the background remain partially by removing a circle from around the figure to give the appearance of a spot light shining on my subject. The texture of his hair and the strong blacks and whites are now silhouetted against a white background making the figure stand out sharply with the contrast.